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SUBJECT: EMBASSY MINSK WEEKLY POL/ECON REPORT - December 14, 2007

¶1. The following are brief items of interest compiled by Embassy Minsk.

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##### Civil Society

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#### ¶2. GOB Registers Pro-Regime NGO Belaya Rus

The Ministry of Justice (MOJ) December 12 approved the registration of the pro-regime NGO Belaya Rus. The chairman of the organization, Education Minister Aleksandr Radkov, filed the application one week ago. Radkov denied recent allegations in the independent press that administrators of universities around the country received official orders to establish Belaya Rus offices at their institutions and enroll 100 students each. At the founding conference November 17, Radkov expressed hope that Belaya Rus would become a pro-presidential political party.

#### ¶3. GOB Adopts 2008-2010 Anti-TIP Program

The GOB December 7 adopted a new national three-year program to fight trafficking in persons and illegal migration. The program is aimed at streamlining efforts by GOB agencies and non-state organizations that combat human trafficking and related crimes. Authorities will increase cooperation with non-governmental organizations and development and distribution of prevention information. The program will also focus on promoting activities against trafficking in children, counteracting child pornography and prostitution, and drawing attention to the issue of human organ and tissue trade.

#### 14. Opposition Party Receives Warning

The MOJ December 10 issued a warning to the opposition Christian Conservative Party (CCP). Authorities issued the warning based on the distribution of a letter sent to governmental agencies that allegedly incited hatred towards the Russian minority and defamed Russian national policies. The party is now facing suspension or liquidation if it does not stop distributing the letter. CCP acting chairperson Yuriy Belenkiy said the warning was unexpected since the party had not yet submitted additional information about the letter requested by the MOJ.

#### 15. Signature Campaign against Religion Law Continues

Protestant lawyer Sergey Lukanin informed the media December 7 that over 40,000 signatures have been collected since April urging amendments to the 2002 religion law. Religious activists believe the law is repressive and violates freedom of religion. Legislation requires 50,000 signatures to initiate a bill to amend laws. Lukanin expressed certainty the activists would gather the required number of signatures to file the petition with the Parliament and President.

#### 16. Brest Officials Reject 64 Demonstration Applications

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Igor Maslovskiy, head of the Belarusian Social Democratic Party "Gramada" for the Brest region announced December 12 that authorities there rejected all 64 demonstration applications recently submitted. The applications were for permission to stage pickets in the region against the abolition of social benefits and privileges. Maslovskiy predicted that applicants will soon receive warnings from the police about possible penalties for ignoring the denials like they did ahead of similar protests in September.

#### 17. Reporter Interrogated by KGB about BelSat

An independent reporter sent a formal complaint December 7 to the Gomel Regional Prosecutor's Office over his interrogation by KGB officers. KGB staff interrogated Sergey Padsasonniy on November 26 about his suspected cooperation with Poland's BelSat television channel. The reporter, a member of the Belarusian Association of Journalists, complained about the questioning to the leadership of the KGB office in Gomel region as well.

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Domestic Economy  
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#### 18. Belarus' Economic Growth Slows

According to official statistics, economic growth has slowed as consumer prices rose during the past year. Belarus' Ministry of Statistics announced December 11 that the country's GDP growth through November slowed to 8.2 percent compared with 9.9 percent last year. Consumer prices rose 9.4 percent, a considerable increase over last year's 5.7 percent rate. Belarus' National Bank announced that the country's gold and foreign exchange reserves grew 96.4 percent to USD 2.7 billion.

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International Trade  
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#### 9. Belarus and Russia Discuss Energy Pricing

Belarus' Ministry of Economy held a press conference December 11 describing the government's plans to negotiate the volume and price of energy imports from Russia for 2008. The two parties have already agreed that Belarus will import 21.6 billion cubic meters of natural gas and 21.5 million tons of oil from Russia next year. No agreement has been reached yet on the 5 billion kilowatt-hours of electricity Belarus plans to import. The GOB is also currently negotiating with Lukoil, Tatneft, Rosneft and Russia's other leading oil traders. The government plans to continue processing at Belarus' two oil refineries at the current volume, though it has announced its intention to cut import subsidies.

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International Relations  
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#### 10. Foreign Minister Announces Venezuela Plans

At a press conference December 10 Belarusian Foreign Minister Sergey Martynov evaluated Belarus-Venezuela relations following Lukashenko's visit there last week. During the state visit, the two countries signed a framework military agreement, and established a 60 percent Venezuelan/40 percent Belarusian joint oil extracting venture to produce 900,000 tons of crude oil in 2008 and two million tons in 2009. Martynov also announced that a Venezuelan delegation will visit Belarus early next year to discuss further agreements. [Comment and Note: Reports did not indicate the amount of the joint venture's start-up capital, or where the cash-strapped GOB would find funds for it. End comment and note.]

#### 11. Quote of the Week

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Valeriy Nadtachayev, head of the KGB's Public Relations Section, espousing the total absence of political prisoners in Belarus:

"We do not have political prisoners in Belarus, because there are no statutes outlining political crimes. So, discussions about political prisoners in Belarus are simply part of the disinformation campaign waged against our country to discredit our external and internal policies. The issue is merely a creation of the European Union to produce the appearance of tyranny in Belarus."

Stewart